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ABSTRACT

In July 1974, the Department of Elementary Education of Rhode Island College was awarded a two year Right to Read grant to develop a preservice preparation program for the teaching of reading. The main objective of this project has been to develop a program based on using the discipline of reading as a means of integrating the following major contemporary thrusts in teacher education: (1) competency-based teacher education; (2) field-based preservice teacher education; (3) on-site inservice staff development; and (4) college faculty development. This was accomplished by developing competency-based courses with field-based components for the areas of reading and language arts, and involving both college and public school faculties in the development of student teaching centers structured according to a competency-based design. Evaluation of the program was by means of an objective-item questionnaire administered to students in the reading and language arts components and an open-ended questionnaire administered to both faculty and student teacher participants in the program. (Author/JMF)

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A DESCRIPTION OF THE RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE RIGHT TO READ TEACHER EDUCATION PROJECT

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A COMPETENCY-BASED MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR COORDINATING PRESERVICE EDUCATION AND INSERVICE STAFF DEVELOPMENT USING READING AS THE INTEGRATING DISCIPLINE

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COMPREHENSIVE EXPLANATION

Introduction

In July of 1974, the Department of Elementary Education of Rhode Island College was awarded a two year Right to Read grant to develop a preservice program for training teachers of reading at the elementary level. The main objective of this project was to use the discipline of reading as a means of integrating major contemporary thrusts in teacher education. With reading as a focal point, the project staff attempted to (1) promote the concept of competency-based teacher education as an alternative program for training teachers of reading, (2) develop field-based components for elementary education majors, (3) provide for on-site inservice staff development at schools designated as student teaching centers, and (4) develop the skills of college faculty to implement a program based upon an interdisciplinary design.

In order to accomplish this objective, four faculty members from the Department of Elementary Education used project funds to: (1) refine an existing competency-based reading course, (2) develop competency-based modules for field testing in an early childhood language arts course, and (3) provide extensive follow-up of students in student teaching through the development of student teaching centers structured according to a competency-based design with a multidisciplinary approach to supervision.

Background

At Rhode Island College, all preservice training of prospective elementary teachers is the responsibility of faculty members in the Department of Elementary Education. Within the elementary curriculum, students are required to take a three-credit course in reading entitled Methods and Materials in Teaching Reading. This is the only required reading course for elementary education majors.

In 1973, the Department, with the support of the college administration, decided to develop an undergraduate course in reading that followed a competency-based approach. The aim was to offer one or two sections of this course as a viable alternative to the conventional offering.

After three semesters of field testing, it became clear that the implementation of a competency-based reading methods course was only the first step in training an effective teacher of reading. Accordingly, during the 1974 academic year, a pronosal was drafted and submitted to the United States Office of Education Right to Read Effort. On July 1, 1974 Rhode Island College became one of thirty-four institutions of higher education to be awarded a Right to Read grant for developing preservice preparation components in the teaching of reading.

The project staff included a project director and assistant director who were both professors in reading, a professor in language arts, and a professor in science.

Program Development

The Right to Read grant enabled the reading specialists on the project team to accelerate the refinement and development of the competency-based reading course. The offering of such a course provided students with an opportunity to experience an individualized, objective-based teacher training program. The structure of the course allowed students to work at their own rate to complete fourteen instructional modules. These modules were included in the handbook entitled Methods and Materials in Teaching Reading: A Competency-Based Approach that was written specifically for this course. Each module contained lists of competencies or objectives in reading with accompanying alternative learning activities and techniques for postassessment. Within the course, students had numerous opportunities to work with children in both public school and laboratory school settings. Whenever a student needed to be observed implementing a lesson, a reading resource teacher was

available at a site school to assess the student's performance with children and provide feedback.

Full-scale field tests of this course were conducted in the first year of the Right to Read project. In the fall of 1974, two reading specialists on the project staff team-taught two sections of this course with forty-one students. In the spring of 1975, the course was implemented with fifty-seven students. A third faculty member is presently being trained to teach this course during the second year of the project.

The second component of the project involved the development of a competency-based language arts course for early childhood majors. During the fall of 1974, the language arts specialist on the team, developed first drafts of eight instructional modules to be field tested the following semester. Also, a collection of materials needed for the initial field test was gathered. In the spring of 1975, the language arts specialist conducted a small-scale field test of this course with twelve students. A management system for processing students through the program was developed that paralled the system used with the reading methods course. During the second year of the project, additional field tests will be conducted in order to further refine and revise this course.

During the past year, the third component of the Right to Read program, a competency-based student teaching experience, was also implemented on a small scale. After one semester of joint planning by the project staff, it was decided to develop an alternative student teaching program with the following features: (1) a flexible arrangement of teaching assignments at schools designated as student teaching centers, (2) a multidisciplinary approach to student teaching supervision, (3) the explicating of specific teaching objectives in the areas of reading, science, and language arts, and (4) an inservice component to train faculty at the site schools.

A school was identified to serve as a student teaching center, and the initial field test took place in the spring of 1975. During that semester, the science specialist and the project director worked together with the school faculty to structure a management system for monitoring students in the program. Meetings between the college staff and school faculty were held periodically to clarify the objectives of the program and resolve any problems that developed.

Additional modules were developed as extensions of the competencies developed in the undergraduate reading course. Student teachers were given opportunities to move from their initially assigned classrooms to other rooms in the building. This procedure provided the students with a broad range of experiences related to the teaching objectives in the modules.

The program at the student teaching center also provided for on-site inservice staff development. During the spring semester, many of the faculty volunteered to participate in a graduate level course taught at the student teaching center by the college's Director of Laboratory Experiences. This course helped the teachers perform in their role as cooperating or critic teachers. Concurrent with the course, the project staff developed a professional resource center at the site school. This center contained a collection of teacher training materials such as professional textbooks and books with suggestions for teaching activities and was used by both teachers and student teachers.

Throughout the semester, both a reading specialist and a science specialist from the college visited the student teaching center at least once a week in order to monitor the progress of the student teachers. During these visits, they were also available to the faculty as resource persons. These professors assisted the teachers in making decisions regarding curriculum improvement and materials selection.

In order to insure the integration of reading skills with subject matter material, student teachers were monitored by both the science specialist and project director, as well as the cooperating teachers. This multidisciplinary approach to teaching supervision is being refined during the second year of the project. In the fall of 1975, the language arts specialist was added to the supervising team. This person is presently assisting in the organization of a second student teaching center.

Budget

From the $61,613 budgeted for the two year duration of the project, $40,287 was authorized for personnel, $6,349 for fringe benefits, $2,250 for travel, $6,000 for supplies, $2,163 for workshops and consulting services, and $4,574 for indirect charges.

Evaluation Methods and Results

During the past year, the ninety-two students enrolled in the competency-based reading course were required to complete a sixty-five item questionnaire. Students were asked to respond to questions related to the process of competency-based teacher education and to the specific elements of the course.

Overall, the results showed that it was feasible to offer a competency-based reading course as an alternative to a conventionally taught one. According to the data, eighty percent of the respondents believed that the course was more or much more valuable than conventional offerings. Also, while nearly one hundred percent of the respondents felt that the amount of work was greater, eighty-three percent indicated that the greater amount of work and time required for the course was worthwhile. Finally, as part of this evaluation, students were asked to rate the clarity of the course objectives. Approximately eighty-five percent of the respondents rated the objectives in most modules as "Clear" or "Extremely clear."

An objective-item questionnaire was also used to evaluate the small-scale field test of the language arts course for early childhood majors. The main function of this questionnaire was to assess the clarity of the objectives stated for the course. The results showed that, on the average, seventy-eight percent of the students rated the objectives as "Clear" or "Extremely clear." A more extensive evaluation of this component will be conducted during the second year of the project.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the initial field test of the student teaching component, an open-ended questionaaire was administered to the faculty and student teachers at the student teaching center. This questionnaire included items related to the various elements of the program. Overall, the comments of both the student teachers and faculty were favorable, especially in regard to the (1) procedures used to orient students to the program, (2) opportunities provided for students to observe and teach different grade levels, (3) availability of extension modules with accompanying teacher training materials, and (4) large amount of feedback given to the student teachers throughout the semester.

Contribution to the Improvement of Teacher Education

The Right to Read project at Rhode Island College has involved an attempt to design a competency-based management system for coordinating preservice education and inservice staff develolment using reading as the integrating discipline.The following contributions to the improvement of teacher education have been made as a result of the institution's attempt to move in this direction.

First, a model for designing and operationalizing a competency-based program has been established. Throughout the project, the staff has designed the various components to be implemented slowly and systematically, moving from a small-scale field test situation to a larger field test effort.

Recently, the Rhode Island College model was highlighted in a national newsletter published by the Right to Read Effort as an example of an exemplary program for training teachers of reading.

Second, a model for designing a student teaching center with both preservice and inservice teacher training components has been developed. Student teachers have been exposed to a training program that utilizes a competency-based design with reading as the central focus of attention. At the same time, the faculty at the site school have been exposed to an inservice staff development program in which their skills as both classroom teachers and critic teachers have been upgraded.

Third, a plan for establishing a student teaching program based upon a multidisciplinary approach to supervision has been developed. College faculty members with expertise in reading, language arts, and science have been working together to develop a management system for the joint supervision of student teachers by professors from different disciplines.

Fourth, a list of objectives for training teachers of reading and language arts has been stated and field tested. At the completion of this project, these lists of objectives will be disseminated by the Right to Read Office to educational institutions throughout the country.

Finally, a collection of teacher training materials has been developed and field tested. To date, a variety of learning activities have been developed and keyed to the appropriate objectives in the reading and language arts modules.

SUMMARY

In July of 1974, the Department of Elementary Education of Rhode Island College became one of thirty-four institutions of higher education to be awarded a two year Right to Read grant to develop preservice preparation components for the teaching of reading. The program that was developed was recently highlighted in a national newsletter published by the Right to Read Effort as a model for an exemplary program for training teachers of reading.

The main objective of this project has been to develop a program based upon using the discipline of reading as a means of integrating the following major contemporary thrusts in teacher education: (1) competency-based teacher education, (2) field-based preservice teacher education, (3) on-site inservice staff development and, (4) college faculty development.

In order to accomplish this objective, the project team, consisting of two professors in the area of reading, one professor in language arts and another in science, has been using project funds to: (1) develop competency-based courses with field-based components for the areas of reading and language arts, and (2) involve both college and public school faculties in the development of student teaching centers structured according to a competency-based design.

During the first year of the project, objective-item questionnaires were administered to students in the reading and language arts components to assess the effectiveness of these courses. Overall, the results indicated that it was feasible to offer a competency-based course with a field-based component as an alternative to a conventionally taught one. An open-ended questionnaire regarding the various elements of the student teaching program was administered to both the faculty and student teachers participating in the program at the student teaching centers. Overall, the comments of the participants regarding the various elements of the program were most favorable.